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ABSTRACT

This essay identifies and illustrates a number of significant features that, in combination, make literary biography a distinct and recognizable genre. Among these are considerations of the various aspects of the composition of literary works, such as sources of inspiration, authors' motives and methods in transforming life into art, and similarities and discrepancies between fact and fiction. Literary biographers relate literary criticism to their subject's life in diverse ways-sometimes for exegesis, sometimes to show the style of a literary mind or personality, and sometimes to find analogues between lives and works. Literary biography also shows the author's art in the perspective of his or her lifetime, illustrating the mechanical aspects of composition and, less often, the creative aspects. Finally, literary temperament, the placement of the author and the author's works in historical and intellectual milieus, and the provision of the particulars of publication and bibliography are also goals of the literary biographer. (KS)

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Writers on Writers: Literary Biography, A Distinctive Genre

Literary biography lives! Its distinctive features separate it from other sorts of biography, just as the distinctive attributes of epics, odes, elegies, sonnets differentiate them as independent poetic genres.

The salient features of, as Leon Edel says, "the writing of the lives of writers," result from the methodology that is uniquely applied to literary figures in making various connections between their lives and their literature. I will identify and illustrate these features here--a task no critic has yet undertaken--to demonstrate the existence of literary biography as a recognizable genre for literary study.

Throughout, italics emphasize each new aspect of the genre.

Biographical Considerations of Literary Composition

Literary biographies commonly treat various aspects of the composition of literary works. This concern sometimes focuses on an author's sources of inspiration for his writings. Often these are seen to be actual settings, persons, or incidents known to the author in real life. Sometimes the biographer aims simply to identify these, as Frederic G. Kitton does throughout Charles Dickens (London: T.C. and E.C. Jack, 1902). Typically, he points out, in Dombey and Son: "Dickens's presentment of little Paul was inspired by the touching personality of a favourite nephew, Master Harry Burnett, a cripple, who died in his tenth year . . . ." (p. 163).[1] Commentators of this sort naively assume that the author merely transferred reality to his fiction, unaltered by artistry.

At other times, the biographer is more careful to try to demonstrate the metamorphosis from life into art, considering at times, the author's motives and his methods. This is apparent throughout Richard Ellmann's carefully-researched James Joyce (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959). Ellmann observes, "Everything Joyce did or thought seemed to move in some way toward [Ulysses]" (p. 453). In one conversation, for instance, Joyce identified himself as a deer, of which Ellmann observes, "He was thinking of his old image of himself as the hunted quarry, which appears comically in the pursuit of Bloom at the end of the Cyclops episode" (p. 452).

Yet after documenting, often with Joyce's letters or other statements, the similarities between the real and the fictional, the biographer also, wisely, discusses the literary alterations and the differences: "Once [Joyce] announced . . . that he had found an analogy for the Homeric pigeon which flies safely between Scylla and Charybdis: it was the throwaway which is cast by Bloom into the Liffey to float successfully between the North and South walls" (p. 452).

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Often Ellmann tries to account for the discrepancies between fact and fiction on either biographical or artistic grounds, or both: "The models for Boylan had to be opposite to Bloom in their manner of dress and speech . . . . Ulysses supplies a few particulars, that Boylan's father was a horse dealer off Island Bridge who sold horses to the British during the Boer War . . . . The horse dealer who had his premises off Island Bridge was James Daly, who does not fit the other details except that, like all other horse dealers in Dublin, he sold horses to the British during the Boer War. There was, however, a horse dealer during the 'nineties' who bore the name Boyland, and had Blazes or Blazer for a nickname" (p. 389).

Literature as Evidence for Life

Yet literary biographers also work the other way around, using the author's fiction as evidence for biographical information. This procedure can at times be extremely unreliable, partly because it tends to ignore or underplay the creative process, the invention and alteration of facts, persons, perceptions for artistic purposes; partly because the biographical "facts," so-conjured, often have no objective verification. An extreme example is Edith E. Kinsley's Pattern for Genius: A Story of Branwell Bronte and His Three Sisters . . . Told Largely in Their own Words (New York: Dutton, 1939). This biography is contrived by assembling passages from the Brontes' novels with real names substituted for the fictional ones. The biographer justifies her practice by commenting that "history is . . . an imaginary reconstruction of events and persons as they might have been; an fiction is usually a series of private histories disguised in convenient romantic dress . . . . [Therefore,] no apology is offered for transference . . . of superb . . . passages of prose from one setting to another, if such passages seem to have biographic verity" (p. 14).

Equally problematic, though not so blatant, are the numerous biographies of Emily Dickinson which assume that because she wrote about romantic love, particularly between 1854 and 1860, she must have had a lover--though they never assume that because she wrote about death . . . . They then proceed to identify, depending on which volume one reads, nearly every potentially eligible man (or in one instance, a woman) she ever knew as the inspiration for the love poems.[2]

Literary Criticism and Literary Biography

In some instances, a critical focus on autobiographical revelation in fiction leads to an unduly biographical approach to the literature, at the expense of its intrinsic literary merit. This is amply illustrated in the lengthy ingenuity with which some of Shakespeare's biographers seek to identify "Mr. W.H." (who may or may not be "the Bright Youth" or "the Lovely Boy"), the "Rival Poet," and the "Dark Lady" of the sonnets, and to discuss Shakespeare's alleged relationships with these persons. Charles Norman, in So Worthy a Friend: William Shakespeare (New York: Rinehart, 1947) identifies one Bright Youth (H.W.) as Southampton, and another as William Herbert (W.H.), and the Rival Poet as George Chapman. In William Shakespeare: A Biography (New York: Harper, 1963), A.L. Rowse disagrees, claiming in part, that Southampton is the Lovely Boy, Marlowe the Rival

Poet, and Mr. W.H. Sir William Hervey (see pp. 161-200).[3] Even if there were an agreement on the identity of these persons, such an approach would lead no closer to understanding the sonnets, either as a literary form, a part and modification of the Elizabethan tradition of sonnet sequences, or even as a literary expression and invention of its author, whether characteristic or atypical.

Yet in Literary Biography Leon Edel makes an extremely convincing case for the biographical reading of imaginative writings from a literary critic's perspective: "[The biographer] discovers recurrent images and recurrent modes of thought; patterns have a way of repeating themselves, for each writer has his own images and his own language and his own chain of fantasy . . . . There is no poet or prose writer who forges a style and achieves transcendent utterance without stamping his effigy on both sides of every coin he mints . . . the style is the man. The biographer can thus argue, with equal validity, that the man is the style. Indeed this is what he is always trying to show" (1957; rpt. New York: Doubleday, 1959, p. 53).

For these reasons, among others, literary biographies often incorporate literary criticism, either interwoven with the biographical narrative or in separate sections. The amount and nature of the criticism is often--though not invariably--determined by the extent to which the biographer considers the author's life and particular works intertwined. The more autobiographically revealing a given work is presumed to be, the greater its significance looms in the biography and the more personally-oriented the commentary is likely to be. In some instances this is justified, as the above quotations from Ellmann's Joyce reveal.

From a critical perspective, biographers seek to ascribe the prevailing tone or mood of an author's works to analogues in his life. As Wellek and Warren observe, in Theory of Literature (2nd ed. rpt. New York: Harvest, 1956) "The poet's work may be a mask, a dramatized conventionalization, but it is frequently a conventionalization of his own experiences, his own life" (p. 8). So, despite the potential unreliabilities of interpretation, and numerous discrepancies between fact and fiction, there are nevertheless parallels, reflections, refractions between an author's life and his works. In Metaphors of Self: The Meaning of Autobiography (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972) James Olney demonstrates that the creative work becomes a metaphor of its creator's self.

Thus biographical analyses of literature have exigetical value. John Meixner interjects a cautionary note on this point: "Where [biographical information] concerns the text itself it should be supportive or parenthetical. It also ought to be used sparingly, confined to points of interpretation that are equivocal, obscure, or controversial."[4]

Yet even with these strictures, the biographical approach to the creative work may help to explain its genesis, some of its themes, allusions, images, settings, characterizations, incidents, aspects of the plot. Carlos Baker provides such explanations throughout Ernest Hemingway: A Life Story (New York: Scribner's, 1969) as in his discussion of "The Snows of Kilimanjaro": . . . 'I put all the true stuff in,' said [Ernest] . . . . Much of the 'true stuff' went far back in Ernest's career . . . . There were memories of Schruns [setting] and the ski instructor Walter Lent [character]

and the poker games at the Madlenerhaus [event] . . . . For the climactic conclusion . . . Ernest drew upon his memories of his own flight out of the plains country [incident] . . . and the distant view of the snow-capped western summit of Kilimanjaro [image and setting] " (pp. 369-370).

Critical exigesis in literary biography can also, as Meixner says, help "us to see what makes a particular writer unique, what helps to give him his individual voice and at the same time his representative quality. From biography we understand more sharply, more graphically, both what a writer was, and could be, and what he was not, and could never be" (p. 113. Italics mine.). Baker's further comments on "The Snows of Kilimanjaro" bear this out: "[Ernest] had said . . . that a writer must be 'an outlyer like a Gypsy.' Had he in fact traded away some part of his gypsy's independence in exchange for the sporting life that he was living now? . . . "The Snows of Kilimanjaro" was filled with evidence of his growing hostility towards at least certain members of the international sporting set" (pp. 289-290).

The Author's Art in The Perspective of His Lifetime

A literary biography is also an appropriate, perhaps inevitable medium, for discussion, as Wellek and Warren note, "the growth, maturing, and possible decline of an author's art" (p. 68. Italics mine). Such a focus involves explorations of the intimate connections between the facts of an author's life and the phenomena and quality of his literary output. Many literary biographies make these connections very convincingly through an interweaving of biographical narrative and literary criticism, inserted at the appropriate points in the chronology.

Mark Schorer's mammoth Sinclair Lewis: An American Life (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1961) deftly weaves these complicated strands into a meaningful pattern. For instance, Schorer uses biographical information to help explain Lewis's literary decline at the end of his life, and also to account for Lewis's occasional writing of better quality during the same period: "Reading through the magazine fiction that Sinclair Lewis was writing [in 1944], one is impressed again by the almost dogged way in which the impossible dreams become the material for the dream factory, by his unwitting tangling of his own confused feelings about hopes for what is not, with hurts from what is . . . . That is why the third magazine piece for 1944, "There's No Excuse for Lateness," an article . . . is a relief: it comes directly from the self-observed surface of his life. [Its thesis is that] . . . to be tardy for an appointment is selfish and arrogant, and important and busy people . . . are always on time. Punctuality was another of [Lewis's] compulsions" (p. 711).

The Creative Process

Ideally, the biographer who succeeded in accommodating and explaining enough of the significant and manifold connections between an author's life and works would also account for his creative process. A few biographers simply attribute the works to divine inspiration. In George Herbert and His Times (London: Methuen, 1906) the Reverend A.G. Hyde uses a painting of an angel speaking to George Herbert to illustrate the creative process.

Yet, perhaps because the act of creating even a short lyric may depend on many facets of an author's entire life, conscious and subconscious, "real" or imagined, incorporated directly or transmuted, more sophisticated biographers rarely try to explain the creative process. The most thoroughgoing attempt, in what might be termed a biography of the mind, "an attempt to get at the working of the faculty [of the imagination] itself," remains John Livingston Lowes' The Road to Xanadu (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1930, x). Yet, though Lowes can account for, presumably, all or nearly all of the hundreds and thousands of sources of imagery, incidents, characters, geography, time, and much of the language in "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," he cannot explain what enabled Coleridge, in his "deep well of unconscious cerebration" to create a work of art, while the same sources might never have coalesced into great literature in the mind of a person less talented. Perhaps, in the final analysis, genius can't be explained, only pointed out in connecting the author's works with his readings, travels, and personal associations, which literary biographers often do.

The Process of Composition

However, a biography can detail the author's process of composition, including his writing schedule (or lack of it) his habits and life-style that are conducive or detrimental to writing. Thus biographies of F. Scott Fitzgerald discuss Scott's turbulent relationship with his wife, and his drinking, in poignant relation to his writing--as a process and as a qualitative product. For instance, in The Far Side of Paradise (2nd ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965). Arthur Mizener points out a number of parallels between the deteriorating relationship of Zelda and Scott, and Scott's own feelings of "emotional bankruptcy" (p. 273) in Tender is the Night (see pp. 270-277).

Literary Temperament

Another important aspect of literary biography as a genre is the treatment of the subject's literary temperament. Boswell's Life of Samuel Johnson[5] is an example par excellence, as he shows Johnson functioning continually as a man of letters, sometimes in a literary milieu, sometimes in more diverse drawing room company. Sometimes Dr. Johnson discusses his own process of gathering biographical information and evaluating it (see III, 71-72). At other times Johnson talks about literature and his own critical precepts: "BOSWELL. 'You will allow Cibber's "Apology" to be well done.' JOHNSON. 'Very well done, to be sure . . . .' BOSWELL. 'And his plays are good.' JOHNSON. 'Yes; but that was his trade . . . he had been all his life among players and playwriters . . . . He abused Pindar to me, and then shewed me an Ode of his, with an absurd couplet, making a linnet soar on an eagle's wing. I told him that when the ancients made a simile, they always made it like something real'" (III, 72-73). Yet even when Dr. Johnson is talking of various other subjects, the reader is always conscious of him as the Great Cham, the Supreme Arbiter of English Letters, because that is Boswell's focus on his subject.

Intellectual History, Milieus

Biographers who focus on an intellectual history of the author often write excellent accounts of the author's ideas, philosophy, and habitual or atypical intellectual stances. Richard Ellmann writes in Yeats: The Man and the Masks (1948; rpt. New York: Dutton, 1958):

> We can see [Yeats'] efforts and combination of [patriotic politics and poetry] very early. Most of what he writes becomes rather ostentatiously Irish and occult. Thus in 1888 he makes a collection of fairy tales in which he asserts that the Irish peasants, because of their distance from the centers of the Industrial Revolution, have preserved a rapport with the spiritual world and its fairy denizens which has elsewhere disappeared . . . .
>
> From 1889 to 1893 Yeats was involved . . . in a three-volume edition of Blake's works . . . . He was pleased to find that Blake's ideas harmonized with those of the Theosophists and the Hermetic Students of the Golden Dawn, for he had now the authority of a great poet for using occult material . . . . (p. 116)

As this quotation indicates, the intellectual influences of prior authors, as well as the subject's influences on subsequent writers, are likewise appropriate subjects for literary biography.

Literary biographers often provide additional illumination by placing their subject's works in the appropriate political, economic, religious, social, or artistic milieus, as does Michael Holroyd throughout Lytton Strachey and the Bloomsbury Group: His Work, Their Influence (1967-68; rpt. Baltimore: Penguin, 1971). Such volumes can show the establishment of new literary modes, techniques, and traditions, as well as the alteration or abandonment of old ones, and discuss the author's relationship to these.

Literary History

Literary biographies often contribute much to the literary history of an author's individual works, as well as of the author's life. They can date--or help to date--the works' composition and revisions, and order their sequence. It does, for instance, matter biographically that Book III of Gulliver's Travels was composed after Book IV, in which Swift's alleged misanthropy is at its most virulent. The biographer aware of this can comment on and perhaps contradict the assertion by many of his predecessors that Swift became increasingly and progressively misanthropic with age, when they base their claim on the increasingly bitter tone of Gulliver's Travels as it proceeds from Book I to Book IV in what they assume is chronological order. Literary biographers can help to establish first and subsequent editions, and determine and discuss textual revisions and their significance. They can thus supply a bibliographical record of the author's canon.

Phenomena of Publication

Biographers, too, can establish and discuss an author's relationship(s) with his editors, agents, and publishers. They can supply relevant facts about the publication of an author's works, including discussion of any difficulties or anecdotal material pertinent to their publication. Biographers can report on the number and significance of editions and volume of sales. Of particular biographical interest is the reception, critical and

popular, of each work; a compilation of early reviews--and later opinions--can be a fascinating index of the vagaries of taste. Equally interesting, for human reasons, may be the author's reaction to his reception, whether it be one of outrage, inordinate pride ("I awoke one morning and found myself famous"), complacency, or indifference.

Conclusion

This essay has identified and illustrated a number of significant features that in combination make literary biography a distinct and recognizable genre. Among these are considerations of the various aspects of the composition of literary works, such as sources of inspiration, an author's motives and methods in transforming life into art, and similarities and discrepancies between fact and fiction. Literary biographers relate literary criticism to their subject's life in diverse ways, sometimes for exegesis, sometimes to show the style of a literary mind or personality, sometimes to find analogues between life and works. Literary biography also shows the author's art in the perspective of his lifetime; it frequently illustrates the mechanical aspects of composition, and less often the creative process. Literary biographers discuss the subject's literary temperament, place him and his works in the appropriate intellectual and historical milieus, and provide the particulars of publication and bibliography.

Identity is visibility. The many distinct characteristics that identify the genre of literary biography help to make it a visible genre by providing abundant material for the scholar and critic. Many of the types of scholarship that have been employed in studying other genres could well be applied to literary biography, at present relatively unexplored as a genre. For instance, any of the particular aspects of literary biography identified here could be examined in the biographies of a particular author, such as "the personal equation" that Swift's biographer make between his life and his works. Or scholars might investigate issues in the lives of particular authors and their biographical treatment--how biographers' attitudes toward the morality of Poe or Byron are related to their estimates and interpretations of their work. Particularly fruitful studies of literary biography would parallel those commonly employed in other genres--considerations of biographical form, structure, mode, imagery, language, or character.

It is hoped that such endeavors will stimulate the refinement of biographical technique and the writing of still more literary biographies of significance. Identity is vitality.

[1] Dickens himself encouraged such searches for the alleged real-life prototypes of his fiction, attesting in the prefaces to many of his novels to their veracity. Thus he says of Nicholas Nickleby: ". . . the BROTHERS CHEERYBLE live; . . . their liberal charity . . . their noble nature, and their unbounded benevolence, are no creations of the Author's brain; but are prompting every day . . . some munificent and generous deed in that town of which they are the pride and honour." Preface to the First Edition, (London: Chapman and Hall, 1839), I, ix.

[2] George Gould is Genevieve Taggard's candidate, in The Life and Mind of Emily Dickinson (New York: Knopf, 1930). Josephine Pollitt believes the lover to have been Major Edward Hunt, in Emily Dickinson: The Human Background of Her Poetry (New York: Harper, 1930). In The Riddle of Emily Dickinson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1951) Rebecca Patterson identifies the lover as Kate Anthon. And so on.

[3] For a blistering account and rebuttal of Rowse's methodology and swaggering--but unwarranted--certainty, see S. Schoenbaum, Shakespeare's Lives (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), pp. 762-764.

[4] "The Uses of Biography in Criticism," College English, 28 (November 1966), p. 112.

[5] Boswell's Life of Johnson, ed. George Birkbeck Hill; rev. ed. L.F. Powell (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1934-50), 6 vols.